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Trabajo de Fin de Grado

**A Sociolinguistic Approach to Black
Feminism Empowerment in Pop-Culture: The
case of Beyoncé.**

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Resumen

Este Trabajo de Fin de Grado se desarrolla en el área de la Sociolingüística que es la ciencia que analiza el lenguaje y su relación con la sociedad. Específicamente, este estudio trata factores socialmente contruidos como el género, la raza y el poder. El objetivo de este proyecto es demostrar la importancia del lenguaje en el proceso de construir la identidad personal, y como forma de empoderamiento, y el papel de la cultura popular en la representación y visibilización de minorías sociales. Para aportar un caso práctico, se ha llevado a cabo el estudio lingüístico del álbum de Beyoncé, *Lemonade*. El resultado ha probado especial importancia primero, al uso de pronombres, además de la temática principal del disco, amor y dinero, ambos con bastante relevancia en el tema del poder e independencia de la mujer. También son relevantes las referencias culturales de la Norteamérica Negra y el uso de palabras malsonantes. Todos estos recursos lingüísticos colaboran para crear la idea de una mujer negra, fuerte e independiente sin necesidad de renunciar a su intrínseca feminidad, en un álbum insertado en la cultura popular con su consiguiente impacto social.

Palabras clave: Sociolingüística, Feminismo Negro, Raza, Género, Empoderamiento, Letras, Cultura Popular.

Abstract

This dissertation is developed in the area of sociolinguistics, which is the science that analyses language and its connection with society. More specifically, this work addresses socially constructed factors such as gender, race and power. The aim of the project is to prove the importance of language in the process of building personal identity, and as a way of empowerment, and the role of popular culture in the visibilization of social minorities. To provide a practical example, a linguistic study of Beyoncé's album *Lemonade* has been developed. The result has shown special importance to, first, the use of pronouns. Then, the main topics addressed, love and money, both quite relevant to the social situation of women and their independence. Also, cultural references from the Black American Culture are relevant and finally, the use of swearwords. All these linguistic devices collaborate in order to create the idea of a strong and independent black woman without renouncing to her inherent femininity, in an album embedded in popular culture with its consequent social impact.

Key words: Sociolinguistics, Black Feminism, Race, Gender, Empowerment, Lyrics, Popular Culture.

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1. Introduction

Language as the main communicative resource in society is an important area of research related to human behaviour and the way we see ourselves, and others, and what surrounds us. Sociolinguistic studies give the opportunity to link language to social variables such as gender and race and observe how individuals, as part of certain groups, construct their own identity through the use of linguistic devices. In this regard, another element that plays an important role in the shaping of identity, especially in our days, is media. Present society is constantly bombarded with advertising that certainly affects the way we see ourselves and the ones around.

This piece of work focuses on the social minorities' representation in popular music through language. Linking gender, race and media representation with language can be useful to observe how certain social groups empower themselves among others. In order to understand the importance of relating all the variables mentioned before it is necessary to provide the reader with a theoretical and historical context. Sociolinguistics has studied gender as a social variable since the conception of gender as a performative, i.e. something that is not biological but as a performance that we develop as we grow up in society. Meyerhoff claims that the idea that there are differences in the language use in female and male speakers has been there since the beginning of linguistic studies; even in early reports of the Caribbean area it was suggested that women and men spoke different languages. As something that is done in context, language analysis is very relevant in constructing gender identity, as it is race: "race is entirely a social constructed category, and so language is a vital part of the system that creates, sustains and legitimates racial inequity" (Gillborn 23). The sociolinguistic studies dealing with race and music are relevant to our approach. They often contemplate the hip-hop culture and the use of African American Vernacular English as a tool to create an independent

culture as a reaction to the mainstream in the USA. In the same way, when studying gender, it is significant to consider the term Feminism and its historical context.

Historically, Feminism has always been a problematic term based on different ideologies and theories for which is difficult to find a common definition. However, Bucholtz sums up the common points defining Feminism as “a diverse and sometimes conflicting set of theoretical and political perspectives that have in common a commitment to understanding and challenging social inequalities related to gender and sexuality” (1). The feminist movement is divided in three different waves: the First Wave was focused on political rights such as suffrage and property; the Second, opened up to a wider perspective dealing with more personal issues such as sexuality, abortion or the role in the family environment. Then, the Third Wave fights to transform the image in Western media of misogyny and anti-feminism representing physical and sexual stereotypes for women that is usually practiced by conservative women settled in the mainstream press (Bean 4). Since this grid pattern only includes white-heterosexual women in the concept of femininity, Third Wave of Feminism is concerned with intersectionality, which includes all races and sexual behaviours in building women identity.

In this Third Wave is where this work is settled and more specifically with Black Feminist Surrogation, which is “an embodied cultural act that articulates black women’s distinct forms of palpable socio-political loss and grief as well as sprinted dissent and dissonance. [...] (it) resists, revises, and reinvents the politics of black female hypervisibility in the American Cultural Imaginary” (Brooks 183). Visibility is central in the process of empowering a collective, since power is a social construction and leans on the public opinion and on the individual’s self-perception. Hence, empowerment practices can not only provide social power but also the individual’s internal idea of

their own power and eliminate the notion of powerlessness for belonging to a certain social group and act accordingly to it (Collins 9-10).

Even if pop-music might be trivialized for its shallow content, the reality is that the form of empowerment that artists such as Beyoncé Knowles Carter personify, lays in that hypervisibility given to the black women collective in a manner that is not attainable for another kind of high-culture. This way, Feminism has been incorporated in the mainstream agenda in such a way that Millenials belong to a generation in which “Beyoncé’s lyrics (are) almost undistinguishable from the writings in Simone de Beauvoir” and they are more concerned with the superficial, unrealistic and degrading imagery that media tries to sell about women (Trier-Bieniek 1). Furthermore, as acknowledged by Gillborn, the event of drawing attention to the black community in pop culture is so important in the way that American culture is known for its tendency to avoid talking about thorny issues that inconvenient the powerful ones. Race is not a main topic in American society and some people are reluctant to talk about it because white people are privileged but they are not willing to acknowledge it (21).

In this context of self-image and identity construction, the role of language appears to be central. Language is the medium through which social relationships are built, both to relate to others and to define oneself; then, languages allow individuals to make themselves and confront social conventions (Litosselit 130; Cameron et al. 81; Llamas and Watt 9; Mills and Mullany 1). Therefore, the study of the lyrics in Beyoncé’s album *Lemonade* aims to analyse how she, as a black woman, builds her identity through the use of linguistic devices and the importance of such a representation in popular culture.

2. Methodology

The analysis of power and empowerment normally finds its meaning in situations when there are social differences. American culture is highly characterised by white-male supremacy and this is reflected in media. According to Cameron, D. et al, empowerment is “a redistribution which takes power away from some people (the powerful) and gives it to others” (88). Therefore, the way in which Beyoncé, being worldwide popular, represents blackness and femininity in her work is itself a way of empowerment since it takes these social minorities to the spotlight and leads to their reconsideration.

To analyse her use of language in order to empower both the black and feminine community, I created a corpus based on the lyrics of the twelve songs on her album *Lemonade*. I chose this album because it is significantly different in both subject and musical style from the earlier Beyoncé’s work. The topics that it covers, which will be analysed later, have a particularly important impact in a historical moment in which Feminism has been transformed into a popular concern. In order to achieve more exact results, the format words such as chorus, pre-chorus, refrain, etc. have been deleted and also the chorus’ and pre-chorus’ repetitions. The final size is 3.416 words. This study is focused specially in the use of language that represents two broad groups: gender and race.

To start the analysis, I used the computer program Wordsmith Tools, a corpus analysis tool, in order to create a word list and study the word frequency. Then I applied the tool ‘Concord’ to analyse in which context those main words appear. After selecting the three most common words (pronouns; love and money) I also analysed the use of pronouns and then studied the cultural references and vocabulary used dealing with

those topics in order to observe how they are treated and value their relevance in the empowerment process. At this stage, the use of Urban Dictionary has been very useful since most of those cultural references are part of the American slang. Finally, I observed the use of swearwords as a way of empowerment.

3. Analysis

3.1. The use of pronouns

The first significant linguistic pattern noticed in the corpus is the pronoun use. In the wordlist of the whole edited corpus, produced with Wordsmith tools, the two first most used words are ‘I’ and ‘You’. Then, other pronouns such as ‘she’, occupies the sixth place, ‘he’, the sixteenth, ‘we’, the twenty-fifth, and ‘they’ the twenty-seventh.

Table 1. The use of pronouns in *Lemonade*

N	WORD	FREQ.	%
1	I	149	4.38
2	You	138	4.08
6	She	42	1.23
16	He	23	0.68
25	We	15	0.44

The similar number of ‘I’ and ‘You’ along with the notable different to the rest of pronouns shows that the author establishes a conversation between herself and someone else. ‘You’ in most cases corresponds with ‘he’, the man she is talking to. The most common cluster is “you and me” (19) and “I love you” (12). The most repeated cluster for ‘she’ is “she works for the money” (14). Beyoncé uses ‘she’ to talk about herself in third person. This kind of impersonation is called *Illeism* and it could be interpreted as a distancing from the problem, “basically, treating ourselves as though

we're other people can change how we think, feel and behave” (Fisher). This way, she ceases to be Beyoncé, for becoming a black woman and appeals the audience to become one too. Then the message is more effective because the hearer takes part in the story and empathy can be more easily awakened.

Table 2. Examples of the use of ‘we’ in *Lemonade*

N	CONCORD
1	desert Yeah, open our mind as we cast away oppression Yeah,
2	old doors open for a while Now we can be open for a while Fo
3	t foot first just in case When we made our way 'til now It's
4	ng All I wanna, ain't no other We together, I remember Sweet
5	I take his ass to Red Lobster, we gon slay If he hit it right

Even if the frequency is not the highest, the use of ‘we’ is quite important. In all examples, except for number 4 which refers to the romantic couple, ‘we’ establishes a sense of community and success after struggle: “cast away oppression”, “can be open for a while (the doors)”, “made our way till now” and “gon slay”. The prosperity is linked to the community and group work. In this sense, Rappaport explains that empowerment is not just an individual sense of power but also the social recognition and political powers in belonging to a neighbourhood or community (121).

In conclusion, pronouns are effectively used in order to create a sense of community. First, it can be seen that the author takes perspective to reach the audience and include it in the message so that it can be understood in first person. In the second one, the pronoun ‘we’ joins the female black community in one word and acts as a kind

of call to fight jointly, recognizing at the same time that the past achievements are common as well.

3.2. Main Topics

After analysing the use of pronouns in the album, and considering the context in which they appear, it is interesting to notice that the main topics addressed coincide with the three most repeated nouns: love and money. These topics can be easily related to the role of women. It is agreed by many authors the theory proposed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, that gender roles are a social construction more than a biological issue, that being feminine or masculine is more ‘to perform’ than ‘to be’ (Butler 7; Christie 116; Mills and Mullany 1; Orelus 20; Skeggs 98; Ehrlich et al.; among others). Consequently, there are roles and characteristics that are socially related to those groups such as the economic and social dependence of women on love relationships.

3.2.1. Love

Regarding love and relationships, women are often socially portrayed as being in the need of couple-love and motherhood in order to fulfil their lives. Lazar, in her study about femininity in advertising, acknowledges that “women’s energies in realising their personal interests, including the pursuit of a career outside the home, are channelled towards seeking fulfilment almost entirely in and through other” (112). Although Knowles-Carter does not renounce to her feelings, she shows a far from weak woman even if she is broken at some points. Despite showing her grief because of the man (“what a wicked way to treat the girl that loves you”; “hold up, they don’t love you like I love you”) she does not lose her pride: “Blindly in love, I fucks with you ‘til I realize I’m just too much for you”; “Suicide before you see this tear fall down my eyes”. “If you try this shit again you gon’ lose your wife”. This last example could even be seen as

an act of giving the woman the power to make romance happen and not just wait for it (Lazar 118).

Moreover, the author introduces a new kind of love: motherhood, and she does not hide its importance for her as a woman: “Me and my baby, **we** gon’ be alright, **we** gon’ live a good life”. There is a shift in the pronoun from ‘I’ to ‘we’ showing her individuality is now plural, which contrasts with the following verse in which there is no shift: “Me and my whoadies ‘bout to stroll up, **I** see them boopers in the corner”. The baby is a part of her black identity, sharing her racial features “I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros”. The visibility as a group and the sense of community to contribute to their empowerment will be later discussed in 3.3.

3.2.2. Money

Continuing with the analysis of Beyoncé’s album, money is highly related to love because women lower position in society often lead them to a dependence on her couple to subsist. Economy is another way to challenge women’s stereotypes in order to empower them by showing women with choices, careers and economic independence. The importance of economic independence for women has been emphasized in the 19th Century, when changing from a rural to an industrial society women started to be specialized out of the house and they were able to own their profits in such a way that it allows them to choose whether they want to divorce or not, for example (Brinig 955). Money is so present in *Lemonade* in a way that sometimes could even be judged as materialistic. The main cluster when analysing ‘money’ in concord is “she works for the money” (13) followed by “she worth every dollar”. This could be interpreted as a manifesto for the addressing of this topic. She clarifies that women work hard for their money and they do not need anyone to give them anything away: “And keep your

money, I got my own”. Also considers money as a form of power as it brings independence “she fights for the power, keeping time she grinds day and night she grinds from Monday to Friday”.

As a conclusion, love and money as two of the main topics when it comes to women’s independence, are treated by Beyoncé in a natural way. She does not renounce to her need of couple love or even motherhood. However, she does challenge the idea that love and tenderness necessarily imply weakness. She contrasts the pain with the strength taken from it and she never leaves her pride as a woman behind. In the second topic, again highlights her pride and refutes that wealthy women take advantage of men in order to achieve their power. It is important how she fearlessly claims she is worth everything she owns.

3.3. Cultural References

To follow the topic of Money, there are also several cultural references that relate the economic independence of women with black identity. ‘D’ussé cup’, as in “Me and my ladies sip my D’ussé cup”, according to the *Urban Dictionary* is an expensive French cognac that has become popular in the USA because Jay-Z, Beyoncé’s husband, drinks it. Another liquor mentioned is ‘Hennessy’, “She mixing u that Ace with that Hennessy”, which is also high-priced and it is specially marketed towards black people (*Urban Dictionary*). Again, challenging gender roles, the author places women in the position of power inverting the roles of women being dependant on men: “When he fuck me good I take his ass to Red Lobster”; “If he hit it right, I might take him on a flight on my chopper”. As described by *Urban Dictionary*, ‘Red Lobster’ is known as a seafood restaurant which is regularly visited by black people; chopper is a slang word for ‘helicopter’, which makes reference to economic power.

Knowles-Carter includes in her work many features of hip-hop music, which is mainly produced by African Americans. Cultural references are one of those features. According to Morgan language rules are used “to mediate and construct a present, which considers the social and historicized moment as both a transitory and a stable one. In this respect, hip-hop represents the height of fruition of discursive and symbolic theories of identity and representation” (63). She adds historical references of the black community specially in her song *Formation*. She notes the disaster of hurricane Katrina, which affected mostly New Orleans and that was very controversial because poor black communities were left behind by the authorities handling the problem (BBC 2014): “What happened at New Wil’ins?”. Also the title itself, and chorus, *Formation* appeals to the police and military formation that suppresses black communities. She calls for a kind of revolution: “Okay ladies now let’s get in formation”. There is personal experience as well: “You mix that negro with that creole, make a Texas bama”. She was born in Texas but her father is from Alabama and her mother is a creole, mixed raced woman. ‘Bama’ according to *Urban Dictionary* “was a southerner trying to blend in up north”, which can be easily applied to the black artist. She also declares her refusal to lose her rural roots even if she is in higher social position now “Earned all this money but they never take the country out of me”.

Physical features inherent in the black race are acclaimed “I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros, I like my negro nose with Jackson five nostrils”. In the author’s own words, *Formation* declares her intention to use power to provoke difficult but necessary conversations about the most fraught topics in American life.

Then, cultural references act as a union for all the black community exalting the sense of belonging to the group. Moreover, they are a joint between the injustices in the past and the present affirming that the struggle continues and the fight is still necessary.

They can also be interpreted as a way of giving visibility and representation to their culture in order to praise it.

3.4. Use of Swearwords

The last element that this work is taking into account is the use of strong, ‘masculine’ language. Christie suggests that willing to take a stand and being masculine means that language use must be far from what is considered feminine such as being yielding, sympathetic and soft-spoken (118). This kind of language of power is often used to construct masculine identity. Again, the pop singer challenges gender roles “suck on my balls, pause, I had enough”; “You can watch my fat ass twist, boy as I bounce to the next dick, boy”; “Buy I ain’t fucking with nobody”. Swearing and taboo language is often used to express extreme feelings, normally frustration and anger, and also functions as a ‘horn’ in the ears of the audience (Jay 155). It is an effective way to call the attention of the hearer because it immediately sounds like that should not be there, that is not right. Furthermore, the use of taboo words such as ‘negro’ means shock for the hearer and intends to show the social stigma of its deep history in racial oppression of blacks (Littlejohn 120).

The use of this elements by a woman, which are often related to men, call the attention of the hearer and act as a way of empowering, portraying women with strength. It could even be seen as a sarcastic call to masculinity, ridiculing men’s excessive use of swearwords in order to show off their power.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of corpora, consisting of the lyrics of Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*, with Wordsmith Tools, along with manual detailed reading, shows some interesting features of the use of language in order to empower black women. This empowerment action is

so significant because, as stated by Hanks, usually popular music artists just adapt to the socially dominant group and abandon their ethnic roots, leaving them without visibility. However, this album could be seen as a direct address to the black community. Beyoncé challenges gender and ethnic roles denying stereotypes and confronting them. Language is the way to do that because “is a means of establishing and maintaining relations, values and identities, but also of challenging routine practice and contributing towards social change” (Litosseliti 130).

To justify the importance of language in this process, this work has proved that first, the author use of pronouns establishes a conversation with the audience and then, the use of *Illeism* invites them to feel and join her struggle, together with the creation of a community by the use of ‘we’. Second, she addressed two of the main topics dealing with women stereotypes and issues: love and money. She does not try to deny the stereotypes linked to women, such as the role that motherhood or the love of the man have in her happiness. In contrast, she acknowledges it and defends the compatibility with being powerful and independent, defending her pride and establishing her own conditions in her love life. Money is given a lot of importance since it provides power and independence from the man. In this concern, she highlights the effort for which she is worth that wealth. Third, the use of historical references of black culture contribute with pride for the community’s roots and takes the opportunity to denounce historical injustice carried out by the system towards this minority. Finally, swearwords draw the attention to gender differences and portray a strong and empowered woman who is not afraid of social stigmas and taboos and who is willing to stand up for justice. Further study could complement the points proposed in this work with a more detailed analysis.

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